

Shropshire Pine Marten Project

Background summary and plans

Shropshire Pine Marten Project was formed in 2009 by Stuart Edmunds, Chair of Shropshire Mammal Group, with the aim of investigating unverified reports of pine marten sightings dating back to the 1970s.

Project Timeline

2009: Project formed independently with support of Shropshire Mammal Group.

2009-2013: Follow-up investigations made on 14 historical reports and 10 new sightings of pine martens* in the Clun Valley. A camera trap was deployed in the vicinity of the most recent sightings.

2013: Funding received to purchase a new camera trap, which was installed at the locations of sightings, but was unsuccessful in verifying them. Instead, data of otters, polecats and other mammals was recorded and shared with the Local Ecological Record Centre (LERC) in Shropshire (SEDN). A conservation pine marten detection dog was hired to locate pine marten presence. The dog indicated several areas with pine marten scent, but no video evidence was recorded.

2015: The first confirmed pine marten sighting took place in Clunton on the 5th of July. Immediate installation of 3 camera traps resulted in the recording of 2 different pine martens on 5 different occasions. The project was then awarded various grants with the support of Shropshire Wildlife Trust to cover the purchase of 20 camera traps and for the creation of a temporary part-time pine marten officer post at Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

2015-2017: Camera traps recorded a pine marten near Bucknell and two more adjacent to the Stiperstones. The habitat was considered unsuitable for pine martens. In 2017, the first evidence of pine martens breeding was discovered in Clunton and a crowdfunding appeal raised £5000 to pay for den boxes, replacement camera traps and cover a small amount of staff time (4 hours per month).

2018: Pine martens were recorded on camera traps in low density in other areas of woodland considered to be sub-optimal.

2019: A camera trap set up by Stuart speculatively in Mortimer Forest near Ludlow filmed a radio-tagged pine marten that had been released in the Forest of Dean 3 months earlier. Over 100 clips of pine martens were recorded across 5 different woodlands in south Shropshire, many of which were of the same individual roaming over several square kilometres. In the same year, Stuart received an award from the International Animal Welfare Fund (IFAW) for efforts to raise awareness of pine martens through lectures, presentations and educational outreach.

2020-2021: Surge in pine marten records on camera traps and a student project from the University of Wolverhampton indicated that pine martens were increasingly rare occurrences in Clunton compared to previous years. During this period, the project team (Stuart plus 5 volunteers) honed the technique of camera trapping for pine martens in sub-optimal habitat and ran 3 training days.

2021: Funding from the Stepping Stones Project (National Trust) allowed the project to train 20 volunteers deploy camera traps effectively. Two volunteers were successful in finding a pine marten within 4 weeks.

2022: Project funding ended, and pine marten monitoring returned to the sole responsibility of Shropshire Mammal Group*.

Time constraints during the 7-year period of 2015-2023 meant that although pine marten records were being collected, there wasn't enough time to collect the meaningful data to show that new camera trapping techniques can be hugely reliable in finding pine martens where they do not leave field evidence. This information, when shared, could allow groups across the country to reliably discover if they have pine martens and other undetected species in their area.

Future plans 2023 - 2025

More time is required to gather data on pine marten presence in other parts of Shropshire. The aforementioned time constraints restricted monitoring to fairly small areas of south Shropshire, but it is possible that woodlands around Church Stretton, Oswestry and Telford (Wenlock Edge included) could be used by pine martens, as could the Mortimer Forest just over the border in Herefordshire. It is possible that some existing woodland management practices could hinder the movement and settling of pine martens, so new data could help shape the future of woodland management planning. The use of a pine marten detection dog is costly, but allows a large area to be checked for the presence of pine martens quickly, with new camera traps used to back up any indications that the sniffer dog makes.

A lack of natural dens (holes in old trees) across much of Shropshire will restrict breeding success of pine martens. The installation of an additional 20 den boxes in quiet areas of woodland could offer pine martens more safety for resting and rearing their young. Boxes are monitored by camera traps once installed and they can be used for several years.

A specific research methodology for modern pine marten monitoring can be written and tested, with comprehensive results making it possible for a research paper to be published. This could be used to inform other people monitoring martens elsewhere.

Ongoing awareness raising and outreach will lead to more reliable pine marten sightings from members of public. Many of the historic pine marten sightings previously mentioned were cases of mistaken identification and the majority of current eyewitness accounts of pine marten encounters tend to actually be of other mammals (polecats and mink).

The project will work with other NGOs and community wildlife groups to gather data on pine martens. Liaison with charities such as The National Trust, Wildlife Trusts and Vincent Wildlife Trust has already taken place to ensure that data is shared with other monitoring schemes.

At present, Shropshire is leading all other English counties for pine marten records and more martens are likely to make their way into the county from other release/translocation sites in Gloucestershire and Wales. A better understanding of their behaviour; movements and distribution, will allow us to better understand their habitat needs and then improve habitats and wildlife corridors for not only pine martens, but for a variety of other wildlife species. Pine martens, along with other species such as goshawk and dormice, are icons of a truly wild Britain and with collaborative conservation efforts through NGOs and landowners, it is possible to ensure that they are here to stay and demonstrate that wildlife can re-establish itself if given a helping hand.

*Pine martens were persecuted to presumed extinction in Shropshire by 1893 and the 1950s in other parts of England and Wales. They are a protected species under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and depend on good quality woodland, providing prey and berry-bearing shrubs in abundance, which is often only found in small patches in western England. They are slow to breed and require well-connected areas of tree cover in which to roam in search of food and a mate.

*Shropshire Mammal Group is responsible for the collation of mammal sightings in Shropshire, which are used to advise developers, councils and planners on the whereabouts of protected species. It is the largest affiliated group of The Mammal Society and is served by a committee of 10 experts and over 200 members.